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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000017

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL/IRF, DRL/CRA, INR/NESA  
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Ambassador underscores importance of respect  
for religious freedom in meetings with GSL Ministers

Refs: (A) 03 Colombo 2173, and previous

- (B) 03 State 335646 (Notal)

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.  
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador underscored the importance of respect for religious freedom in separate January 5 meetings with Sri Lanka's Buddhist and Hindu Affairs Ministers (see bio-data in Para 8). Both ministers asserted that the GSL was trying to tamp down religious tensions, noting that the PM had formed a committee to review the issue. That said, both ministers indicated their support for proposed legislation that would outlaw so-called "unethical conversions." The proposed anti-conversion legislation seems quite popular across a wide swathe of Sri Lankan society, although it is not yet clear whether the GSL plans to move forward with it. END SUMMARY.

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Buddhist Affairs Minister discusses Draft Bill  
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2. (C) On January 5, Ambassador Lunstead held separate meetings with Minister of Buddhist Affairs W.J.M. Lokubandara and Minister of Hindu Affairs T. Maheswaran to review Ref B points on religious freedom in Sri Lanka. The Ambassador also used the meetings to stress that the GSL should take immediate steps to prevent further attacks on Christian churches. In their meeting, Lokubandara told the Ambassador that he was strongly against the attacks. He asserted that the Sinhalese extremist Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party was behind the violence (though he did not provide any evidence to back up this claim). He added that he and fellow MPs were in the process of bringing a motion in Parliament condemning the attacks.

3. (C) Concerning religious issues more generally, Lokubandara mentioned that Prime Minister Wickremesinghe had recently set up a committee to deal with recent tensions sparked by the death of a radical Buddhist monk in early December (see Ref A). The committee is comprised of ministers who have responsibility for religious-based issues (one each covering Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam) in their portfolios. The general mandate was to look into the source of the recent religious tensions, as well as to examine proposed legislation that would ban so-called "unethical conversions." Lokubandara noted that, immediately following his meeting with the Ambassador, he had to go to a meeting of this committee.

4. (C) Regarding the proposed anti-conversion legislation, the Ambassador wondered whether it would not be better to pursue something positive, such as developing a code of conduct for all faiths in Sri Lanka, rather than implementing legislation that possibly would be punitive. Lokubandara responded favorably to this suggestion, but admitted feeling pressure from some extreme factions within the Buddhist clergy to move forward with the proposed legislation. He acknowledged that the proposed legislation put the government in a tight spot: The Sri Lankan Constitution protected all religions, but it placed Buddhism in the "foremost" position. There was an inherent conflict in this and the GSL had to deal with different social groups with widely differing views of religious issues. The Ambassador noted the difficulty in distinguishing between different types of conversions, such as between an "inducement to convert" and a good work by a charitable organization. Lokubandara said he agreed with the Ambassador on the value of ensuring religious freedom, including the freedom to convert by choice. He made a point of stating that if it had not been for Henry James Olcott -- an American convert to Buddhism who came to Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth century -- Sri Lankan Buddhism would have never had the revival it experienced then, nor be as vibrant as it is today. That said, Lokubandara commented that he still believed

that "unethical conversions" had occurred around the country and needed to be prevented.

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Meeting with Hindu Affairs Minister  
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15. (C) During his meeting with the Ambassador, Hindu Affairs Minister T. Maheswaran expressed views similar to those expressed by Lokubandara. Regarding the proposed anti-conversion legislation, Maheswaran noted that he felt there was "absolutely no need for people to move from one religion to another." Explaining the genesis of the proposed legislation, Maheswaran related that Hindu religious leaders had approached him last year and asked him to draft legislation that would "not allow people to change their religion for incentives." Maheswaran said he had gone ahead and done so. Ambassador Lunstead made the point that religious freedom, particularly the ability to change one's religion, was an important matter for the U.S. and others in the international community. In discussing the issue, it would be difficult to distinguish between groups that offered inducements to convert and groups that did "good works." The Ambassador noted the example of the (Hindu) Ramakrishna Mission, which practices charitable works. Minister Maheswaran took the Ambassador's point, indicating that he did not want to stop "willing conversions."

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) No one in Sri Lanka publicly defends the recent church attacks, which seem to be the work of a fringe network of Buddhist extremists. Based on the Ministers' comments and what we have picked up elsewhere, however, the proposed anti-conversion legislation seems quite popular across a wide swathe of Sri Lankan society including Buddhists and Hindus. The Catholic Church, the majority Christian community, has also come out against so-called "unethical conversions," although it has not actually endorsed the proposed legislation. The only group left out in the cold is the Evangelicals, who are under one percent of the population and, as a very small minority, are the target of the proposed legislation.

17. (C) COMMENT (Continued): All that said, it is not clear if or when the GSL plans to push ahead with the proposed legislation. It is tricky for the GSL, for example, to define so-called "unethical conversions" in a way that that everyone can agree with. In addition, the PM and other members of his immediate circle, who hail from "cosmopolitan" Colombo and are concerned with Sri Lanka's international reputation, appear reluctant to move forward at this time (hence, the PM's essentially stalling tactic in forming the committee discussed by Maheswaran and Lokubandara). It is not clear how long the PM and his allies can hold out, however. END COMMENT.

18. (C) Bio-data on Ministers Lokubandara and Maheswaran follows:

-- Minister of Buddhist Affairs W.J.M. Lokubandara is an attorney-at-law. Born in 1941, he is an honors graduate from the University of Peradeniya. He also earned a degree in the UK in Sanskrit. He was first elected to Parliament in 1977 as a United National Party (UNP) MP from Haputale in Uva District in southeastern Sri Lanka. In the present government, he is also the Minister of Justice, Law Reform and National Integration. For Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, Lokubandara is considered to be a key link to the important Buddhist clergy. He is amiable and quite knowledgeable on Buddhist matters. He is Sinhalese Buddhist and is married. He speaks excellent English.

-- Minister of Hindu Affairs T. Maheswaran was born in 1966 and educated at St. John's College in Jaffna. A businessman, he entered politics in 1998 when he was appointed the UNP organizer for Jaffna. He was elected to Parliament from Jaffna in 2000, and has served as Hindu Affairs Minister since December 2001. In his capacity as minister, he also serves as Chairman of the Hindu Cultural Trust Fund and is responsible for the Palmyrah Development Board. He takes a strong pro-Tamil stand on many issues, and is considered close to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Of late, he has gotten into sharp arguments with the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) in Jaffna over the "high security zones" and over vehicle accidents involving SLA personnel. He is friendly by nature. He is a Tamil Hindu and is married. He does not speak much English.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

